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# ANCIENT TRADITIONS AND PERSONAL MYTHOLOGY: AN IMMORTAL CONNECTION TO WILDERNESS

James Brantley

Clemson University, jbrantl@g.clemson.edu

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ANCIENT TRADITIONS AND PERSONAL MYTHOLOGY; AN IMMORTAL  
CONNECTION TO NATURE

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts  
Printmaking

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by  
James Matthew Brantley  
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Accepted by:  
Professor Sydney Cross, Committee Chair  
Professor David Detrich  
Professor Todd McDonald

## **ABSTRACT**

My personal experiences with nature lead me to have a very primal relationship with wildlife and landscape. These experiences elicit primal internal responses of fear and wonderment. They peak my imagination in a way that nothing else does. To effectively visualize this, I create prints and sculpture that present my personal mythology and symbols.

The use of mythology has historical precedence. The use of myth helps us make sense of the aspects of life that are ethereal, intangible and difficult to understand. To visualize my experiences in nature, I create network of personal mythology and symbolism based on personal experiences, Native American myths, and literary narratives. Possibly akin to the motivations of the ancient artists that drew animals on cave walls, I have a basic need to study and know wildlife, and I do that through the creation of personal mythology and art. In this body of work, I use my own personal mythology to visualize the spiritual aura of the wilderness, the afterlife, connection with ancestry, and the strange ways it fuels our imaginations. Alongside artists like Charles Burchfield, whose paintings give landscape a vibrant energy, and Leonard Koscianski who visualizes animals in a mythic and powerful way, my work embraces and makes visible the power nature has on our imaginations.

My experiences lead me to think of animals as mythic beings extremely in tune with their environment with supernatural abilities to disappear and reappear. My mythology helps me to make sense of these powers that I have witnessed so many times. My studio practice makes a more solid connection to ancestry, positing that recording these acts and experiences is something that has always been important to us, peaks our curiosity and imaginations, and has gone relatively unchanged for thousands of years.

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## **CHAPTER 1- INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL PREFACE**

Humans have consistently made art that attempts to visualize an emotional response to landscape and animals. While this tradition is one of our most ancient, it is still pertinent. Experiences in nature that overwhelm our imaginations just like they did to ancient peoples are still present. Based primarily in printmaking and sculpture, I make art that celebrates the timeless reverence for nature, and capitalizes on the historically and continuously spiritual and mythic aura of close experiences with nature and animals through the context of personal mythologies and experiences. My experiences in nature elicit primal internal responses of fear and wonderment. These experiences peak my imagination in a way that nothing else does. To effectively visualize this, I create a network of personal mythology and symbols that express the quality of my experiences with nature.

The history of humans studying and recording wildlife goes back thousands of years, from the Lascaux caves in France, an ancient cave system whose walls are covered in drawings of animals made by ancient hunters<sup>1</sup>, to Gobekli Tepe<sup>2</sup>, an ancient temple in Turkey that is covered with reliefs and sculptures that describe the land and its animal inhabitants. The animals found in these examples are rendered in a way that elevates them to a mythic status. It is apparent that the animals surrounding ancient humans peaked their imaginations as well.

The drive for me to make this work is a deeply rooted personal motive, as I come from a family of outdoorsmen. This has gifted me with a history of interactions with animals and nature. One of the basic points of departure for much of the work is the response to time spent in the wild

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/lasc/hd\\_lasc.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/lasc/hd_lasc.htm)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/gobekli-tepe.html>

while hunting and fishing. What I revere most about these activities is the response of primal fear and wonder, the communication with ancestry, and the basic albeit brutal qualities of the acts. I participate in the genuine feeling that hunting and fishing are things that touch on the most basic and ancient emotions of humans. I remember very well the strange combination of feelings that came the first time I killed a deer, a combination of pride, maturation, and guilt. It took some time to reconcile exactly how I felt about it, though I still feel that same wide-eyed childish response when I hunt all these years later.

I later realized that this sort of sublime experience with nature wasn't at all accessed exclusively with the hunt, but also when put in a position of potential danger, or when my sense of personal space was challenged. I recall a specific instance when, as a very young boy fishing with my father in a strip mine reclaim. I came in close contact with beady eyed terror; a pair of massive Alligator Gar stalking the muddy waters just in front of me. They looked like dinosaurs; about 10 feet long, weighing hundreds of pounds, giant stone-like scales and a gaping pit of a mouth full of razor sharp teeth. My father pointed them out to me, also surprised at the sight. I reeled in my line, set down the rod and reel, and just watched them skulk through the muddy water. They were massive but fluttered around just beneath the surface like weightless titans. Their eyes were hollow and dark, but seemed somehow wise.

That experience remains in my memory and imagination. When our sense of superiority in nature is overturned by the presence of such an animal, the emotional response is frightening, exciting, and ethereal. Similarly, when I hunt for food, the internal response is a strange one. I rejoice in the sustenance, though I also feel the sharp pangs of guilt at having killed such a mythic animal as the white tail deer. In various artworks, my practice pays homage to the experience of hunting and fishing, which are powerful things to endure. This body of work accesses those types

of experiences. It visualizes the intrinsic turmoil of the hunter, but also posits that sublime and fleeting experiences with nature and animals can fuel our primal fears and wonders in ways that nothing else can.

To express my own primal fears and intrigue with these concepts, I create a network of images and myths. The use of myth helps us make sense of the aspects of life that are ethereal, intangible and difficult to understand. For instance, in the ancient world, this may have been what the artists in the Lascaux caves of France, or those that built Gobekli Tepe in Turkey set out to do by rendering the animals in those places in a way that elevated them into a mythic status. It is apparent that the wildlife inspired early humans to make records of their interactions with it. I share a similar motivation in that I have a primal and very basic need to reckon with the life forces around me, and I do that through the creation of personal mythology and art. In this body of work, I use my own personal mythology to consider the spiritual aura of the wilderness, the afterlife, connection with ancestry, and the strange ways it fuels my imagination.

## **CHAPTER 2- THE PHYSICAL APPEARANCE OF THE WORK**

The process of printmaking lends itself to the nature of this work. In particular, the reductive woodcut process allows me a chance to use a naturally occurring material to develop the image, establishing a basic connection with nature. The layering and printing of information also speaks about the nature of my connection to the ancient world, quoting a gradual sequence with layers of history. The sculptural works deploy size to elicit the responses of fear and



bewilderment, but the prints create glimpses of worlds and god like characters that we cannot otherwise access.

The images are executed through woodcut and intaglio processes. These processes allow for a dramatic value and color scale as well as allowing the actual plate materials (metal and wood) to show themselves, allowing me to capitalize on the transformative and emotional aura of the subjects and narratives in the work. The sculptural works play into a similar type of response, as their primary point of departure is size. Often, the strongest indicator of an animal's presence or personality is its size, whether that is its weight, the size of its antlers, horns, tusks, or the ferocity of its teeth and claws.

My work starts as a narrative or image that I procure from natural history studies, personal narratives and mythology, or my own experiences. The presentation of images is basic and often done with only enough mark making necessary to express shapes and surfaces, though I'm also interested in the working materials having a presence in the work. This kind of working can be seen in plates where scraper marks are intentionally left un-burnished to suggest the process and materials (see *Akela the Grey Wolf* (figure 1)), in woodcuts where the raised grain gives the woodblock more of a presence in the image (see *Haunted Displacement* (figure 2) and *follow/protect* (figure 3)), and also in the sculptural works where the evidence of the hand is either intentionally left behind, or never totally polished away, see sculpture *I remember you* (figure 4). In this piece, the hand worked surface is left as is to express the rigid scales of the actual animal. This piece also refers to a frightening experience I had with this type of fish as a child. I compare the construction of this sculpture in some ways to the conditions under which ancient animal based art may have been made. Ancient cave paintings are usually basic renditions that express a character or an act. There is rarely much refined detail, but the message is clear. I

wanted to deploy the same type of urgent and basic method of working in this piece. This is done here by ‘drawing’ with the fresh plaster and working it in ways that while not meticulously rendered, communicate a basic description of a real experience with one of these beasts. It challenges our size, thus in some ways resurrecting my childhood fear of what stalked the flooded river plains of my home. The gar has become a cornerstone in my personal mythology; its presence in the work speaks for the instances in nature where some beasts are unconquerably immortal, sparking the curiosity and fear of generation after generation of people.

In the series of woodcuts, *The Heavy Heart of the Hunter* (figure 5) illustrates some of the concepts I discussed earlier. In this print, the viewer is put in the position of the one who has startled the deer. Furthermore, a decidedly more pointed take on the relationship between hunter and animal is visualized. The deer are shown in a state of alert, suddenly aware of that foreign presence. The reflective pool of water at their feet references a Cherokee myth that explained the importance of not squandering one’s kills and how important it was to give thanks to the animals of the earth<sup>3</sup>. The ladder image references another myth that my family told me as a child that details the trials of the afterlife of a hunter. In this myth, upon death, they see a ladder before them that goes out over the underworld and up to heaven. If the hunter had taken their kills responsibly and gave thanks, then those animals’ souls would be free and without a want for vengeance. If the animals had been squandered and the hunter had not given thanks, the hunter would have to carry the dead bodies of the vengeful spirits up the ladder. If the load was too heavy, the hunter would fall off into hell. This is a story that my grandmother told me when I first began hunting. Although we never practiced Cherokee religion in our home, I always hunt and fish as if that myth is true. This set of images combined creates a personal myth that helps me to

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<sup>3</sup> Duncan, Barbara R. *The Magic Lake* as told by Freeman Owle. *The Origin of the Milky Way and other living stories of the Cherokee*. Pp. 42-44

make sense of the strange relationship between the animals I hunt and myself. The color choices and value scale reference the times of day when deer are typically most active, but also to give the animals a particular supernatural energy that blends them into their surroundings. The hunting hawks pictured overhead are less rendered than the ground beneath them, suggesting that the encounter with these animals still has an undetermined outcome.

The sculptural work also attempts to elicit that response of fear or bewilderment, such as the piece *Epic of the Hunters* based on the Narwhal tusk. This piece began by carving the 2D image of the tusk into a plank of wood and printing the image with white ink onto strips of tarpaper, so that it essentially created a ‘negative’ of what the actual tusk looks like. The prints were then adorned with different narratives that all accessed different aspects of my subject matter; some referenced deer hunting, some catfish noodling, and some were lifted from parts of Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Books* that bear resemblance to my own experiences. These narratives were written onto the prints with black acrylic paint, and outlined in a muted brown, so that the text seemed to glow from behind. Once the block was printed several times, it was glued to several other planks of wood, and sanded down and carved so that it assumed the actual three-dimensional form of the Narwhal tusk. Like the initial prints, the tusk was painted black and decorated with images and text that make connections between my own narratives, and the narratives of the space the Narwhal inhabits, and the people who interact with it. The prints and sculpture combined create an installation that, like the piece *Heavy Heart of the Hunter* is ethereal, and both structured yet free flowing. The tusk is hung so that it protrudes from the wall similar to how it might from the animal, and the prints are attached to the wall around it while some drape to the floor, some wrap around the tusk, and some are tangled with others. The primary theme in this mode of presentation is to complement the facsimile of the tusk with the narratives written on the prints to communicate an epic of narratives, people, and animals. The

sentences written on the tusks describe emotions felt when deer hunting, when fishing, and some are lifted from parts of *The Jungle books* that compare its characters experiences and emotions to my own. Furthermore, this is accentuated by the facts that not only are Narwhals surrounded by a mythic and bizarre aura, being called ‘the unicorns of the sea’<sup>4</sup>, they are coveted by local natives for sustenance.

In my studio practice, I reflect on my own experiences, studies, and how my personal mythology creates the context for how the work is presented. In the works on paper, animals and landscapes are sometimes largely shrouded in darkness and the two often ‘melt’ together. This mode of presentation comments on the transformative and ethereal quality of the natural world and personal myth, though it also comments on a very particular personal experience. This ideology can be seen in works like *Bottomless* (figure 7) and *The Heavy Heart of the Hunter*, where the animals, land, trees, and water all run together into a single force. Some forms are either trying to take tangible shape, or are also decomposing into a ghostly state. This mode of presentation references the mythic power animals seem to have at disappearing into the forest or into the water and completely escaping our sight in an instant. For me, this also recalls a specific instance where I scoped a field for several minutes while deer hunting one day shortly before sunrise. The moment I had determined that the field was empty; a deer disappeared into the woods in a flash of white. We had been looking right at each other the entire time, though only one of us was aware of it. These color schemes and value scales also reference the visual and emotional qualities of catfish noodling. When I dive underwater in pursuit of the giant Flathead, there is a very particular place my mind goes to. I’m in an environment where I can’t breathe, I can’t hear or see very well, and I can’t walk or stand. Foggy forms of human, ground and fish run

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Narwhal’ entry. <http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/narwhal/>

together in a wash of greens, browns, and blacks. The event is shrouded in darkness and it is a very dramatic and mobile thing that is replicated in the color schemes and style of mark making.

The matrix in my work is usually defined by black or deep shades of colors with sharp contrasts appearing in highlights throughout the composition, creating a dramatic value scale. This stems from the physical appearance of the environments I hunt and fish in at particular times of the day. It is also a response to my awareness of the history of hunters who came before me. For me, one of the most intense parts of hunting deer in the early morning is the slow and silent descent into the forest. One must walk quietly, breathe quietly, listen and look intently, while immersed in the pre-dawn deep blues, greens and blacks. The world at that time seems to be intensely alive; crickets chirp, owls hoot, coyotes howl, and deer stomp and blow in the brush at the sounds of potential danger. The value scale is grand and dramatic as the sun gradually breaks and colors and shapes slowly reveal themselves in the morning light. My color choices and value scales in my work are created to emulate this ethereal and transformative shift in value I have experienced in nature. It has always fascinated me that many animals are so active in the darkness; it always seemed to me that humans rely the most on the safety of daylight. Trail camera photos are automatically snapped with a motion sensor at wild hours of the night, capturing ghostly photographs of all manner of wildlife. Many animals are more at home in the darkness than humans as it simply doesn't usually hinder them the way it does us. This concept also plays a role in my value scales and color choices, creating dimly lit environments that imbue animals in the image with incredible power and presence that humans cannot share. This value scale and use of transformative movement and light is present in *Haunted Displacement* and *Where the Caribou Come From* (figure 8). In the latter, the ghostly or unformed Caribou issue forth from a glowing, perhaps white-hot fissure in the earth. Their eyes, feet, and parts of their body emanate a ghostly, perhaps gelatinous substance that glows bright in a very dark and cold

environment. This transformative and magical quality stems from not only a narrative about how the Alaskan Gwich'in imagined the presence of the Caribou in their land, but also the mythic aura that surrounds the unspoken connection between animals and land<sup>5</sup>.

### **CHAPTER 3- ARTISTIC CONNECTIONS AND INFLUENCES**

I draw from other artists that share a similar content, but also from sources whose materials I can identify with, themes put aside. In particular, I'm very interested in the ways Anselm Kiefer handles his materials and images. While our work doesn't share subject matter, our work does however share treatment of surface and method of image making. Some of his larger canvases have several layers of paint, dirt, sticks and other materials that give the works a very physical and tactile landscape-like surface. Some of his sculptural works use their own materiality, industrial components in particular, as a way to express the literal mental and emotional weight of some of the concepts he works with. His images are at times very iconic and hierarchical, in particular the piece *Grane* comes to mind, the large-scale woodcut of the iconic horse standing in the flames that had carried its rider to her death in the Wagner Operatic narrative<sup>6</sup>. My approach to expression is similar, as I reflect on the context of the print as a step of removal in the expression of my subject matter. This means that the print is a culmination of manipulations made on a surface that isn't what is shown in the gallery. Similarly, my work rarely points directly to the hunt itself, but rather the experience and mythic qualities of engaging the wilderness and the ancient human tradition of looking at and recording nature. The context of

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<sup>5</sup> Heavey, Bill. "People of the caribou." *Field and Stream*. February 2011; 52-59, 75-76.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object\\_id=61992](http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=61992)

my prints navigate themes of removal and distance from some of my subjects, while I use sculptural works to accentuate the overwhelming and at times bizarre and frightening physical presence of certain aspects of the natural world.

I find American Regionalism intriguing, in that artists from this period explored the basics of landscape and the cultural framework of different locations in America, and how it was so closely related to their relationship with local landscape. Charles Burchfield is particularly inspiring; whose work gave basic elements of landscape a vibrant, living appearance.

Burchfield's body of work as a whole attracts me, given that his images seem to work together as a catalogue of the indicators of a particular place, which for him was rural Ohio. The subjects in his work; the basic elements of landscape, radiate with a living sense of animism, suggesting that all these natural forms have a mind and energy of their own<sup>7</sup>. While I don't consider my work to fit exclusively into an American vernacular, I do appreciate the idea of expressing the energy found in the land and characteristics of that land that surround us. Some particular Burchfield works, like *Starlit Woods* of 1917, I share a strong affinity with. The image is vertical, and the composition leads the eye up into the animated night sky, while a distant and radiant glow vaguely lights the landscape below. Burchfield had a powerful hand at expressing the transformative and animated quality of the natural world, similar to how I also express it.

Leonard Koscianski is another contemporary artist I share some similarities with. Koscianski's works are typically very crisply rendered paintings that depict ferocious animals that often find themselves in tightly squared away subdivisions and towns. The juxtaposition of these intensely visceral beasts and quaint suburbia creates an interesting narrative that plays with our notions of animal and wilderness. For me, it starts to disrupt the notions I have about where

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<sup>7</sup> Bailey, Suzanne. *Essential history of American Art*. Pp. 128 and 130.

wilderness exists. It creates a transformative experience where viewers are asked to reconsider wildlife in light of their own existence. My work does something similar, though does not touch on the notions of human sprawl and development. Koscianski's work is much more centered on a realistic depiction than mine, expressing a strange combination of domestication and wild that is best expressed in very tactile depictions. His polished and intricate images of fierce animals often locked in combat or on the prowl elicit an emotional and perhaps frightened response from viewers. In a 2010 interview, Koscianski states;

*"Fierceness is in all of us; it erupts from the depths of our animal brain. As we mature we learn to control it... when uncontrolled it can destroy us. Reaching any difficult goal requires a certain amount of inner fierceness."<sup>8</sup>*

My work also communicates with the inner emotions of what Koscianski calls 'the animal brain'. This tradition of celebrating the emotional and mythic response to animals and nature is upheld in my studio practice. Being in nature or being in close contact with animals can be a sublime and transformative experience. Nature can sustain us, but also has the potential to be fatally dangerous. This conjures a mixture of primal fear and wonderment that is a basic component of the human experience. Walton Ford is another artist that I also share some common ground with. Ford's work often takes the form of life sized paintings of animals rendered in scientifically correct ways. Ford's work might communicate to my own in that the viewer's personal space and perhaps sense of dominance is overturned when faced with aspects of the wilderness that challenge our size and personal space. Using the simple physicality and size of an

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-seed/leonard-koscianski-fierce\\_b\\_705368.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-seed/leonard-koscianski-fierce_b_705368.html)



animal or features of an animal is a mode of presentation that I employ primarily in my sculptural works, such as in the piece *Epic of the Hunters* and *I remember you*.

In the past, I have also had a similar experience with light or energy defining a space while experiencing the work of James Turrell. His work employs light to seemingly create a three dimensional space or structure, and it often takes the viewer several minutes to adjust to the space and realize the organization of that space. In this, the viewer's senses are compromised and heightened in just a few minutes as we are placed in a space that's optimized to transform our senses. My experiences with Turrell's works are similar to the experiences previously described in relation to acclimating oneself to the forest in the hours just before dawn. This experience is visualized primarily in the prints. Often, dark and subtle shifts in value require viewers to study closely what is present in the image, a prime example of the requirement for this type of engagement can be seen in *Where the Caribou Come from*, where the last two runs of the reduction, deep royal blue and black, make it difficult to discern landscape from animal until the eyes adjust to the very slight shifts in value.

I draw comparisons to Baroque era images as well. Works from this time were dominated by heavy shadows and small highlights, using chiaroscuro to define forms. In this, viewers are again asked to use what few details are visible to determine what might be hidden from them. Figures and other details can be discerned in almost complete darkness with only the slightest of visual clues. This act of slowly reading an image by determining what is and isn't immediately visible again correlates with my own experiences with my subject matter, as well as how I approach making an image. One of the parts of the foundation of Baroque era image making was that in its departure from Renaissance style painting, it began to present the images in a way that was much more realistically engaging to the viewer, coming off of the two dimensional surface

and into the viewers space<sup>9</sup>. No longer were the images standoffish vignettes that the viewer couldn't feel as if they were actually a part of. The images became much more dramatic and expressed much more physicality and movement. My work also employs a high degree of dramatic value scale and movement. In the print *Haunted Displacement*, large portions of the image are shrouded in darkness, and the grass seems to evaporate into the sky, which comes together to form the ghost like image of the Elk.

#### **CHAPTER 4- THE MEANING AND FUNCTION OF 'MYTH' IN THE WORK**

The visual characteristics creating an ethereal condition place my work in a mythic context. However, there are also repeating subjects, motifs and color relationships that also function as indicators of different types of myth. The phrase 'personal mythology', in line with this body of work, refers to a number of symbols and images. The alligator gar, a species of large predatory fish that inhabits primarily the Southeastern United States, is continuously used in the work. This image refers to an experience I had with the fish when I was young. The image of the fish itself represents an experience of fear, bewilderment, wonder, and of a prehistoric age as this particular species is an ancient one.

The catfish is another frequently appearing image, and is typically deployed to represent strength and a monstrous or Leviathan-like presence. I have caught and eaten catfish zealously every season for as long as I can remember, and I often reflect on the staggering numbers of them I have used for sustenance. This reflection leads me to a strange emotional limbo of thankfulness

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<sup>9</sup> Sutherland, Ann Harris. "Seventeenth Century art and architecture". Page xxi. University of Pittsburgh, Pearson Prentice Hall. 2005.

and guilt, and consequently makes it absolutely imperative for me to create art that pays homage to the animal that I use for food, but also find amazingly beautiful and sublime to behold. I usually render the catfish so that it appears beastly but ethereal, elevating it to a simultaneously threatening and nurturing status. In the print *Bottomless*, both species of fish appear together to show this compilation of wonder, primal fear, and to imbue them with a mythic status. In this entry in the series of woodcuts, both the catfish and gar erupt from the root system of a tangled tree that barely breaks the surface of muddy water. The tree is covered with glowing flagellums that reach into the sky giving it a personality less than a passively living tree, and more of a moving and thinking organism. The fish swim out towards the viewer and to deeper waters, literally being born from the tree and the water, somewhat similar to how the caribou erupt from the Earth in *Where the Caribou Come From*. The color pallet in *Bottomless* expresses a physical vibration and movement as soft warm colors twirl about with muddy shades of green. This image employs an inhibited sense of perception and space that comes with being submerged in muddy water hunting catfish by hand during noodling season. Being in that environment that inhibits vision, movement and hearing forces me to rely almost solely on blindly feeling my way along, unaware of where one form begins and another ends. What I am forced to assume are chunks of rock and wood suddenly become the crushing bite of the catfish. This piece illustrates the emotional response to the inability to use one's primary senses to distinguish forms clearly. This emotional response makes it seem as though these mythic and powerful animals materialize out of muddy nothingness. The physical act of noodling the catfish leaves me sore, bloody and out of breath. However, the intrinsic experience conjures emotions that are just as alive today as I believe they were in the first humans.

Several characters and images from previously existing narratives and myths often surface in the work as well. In Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Books*, several characters such as

Akela the gray wolf teach Mowgli the laws of the jungle as he matures. Though my father read these stories to me as a very young boy, It wasn't until later that I realized the parallels between what the animals taught Mowgli about the forest and it's inhabitants, and what my family taught me about the same things. In the piece *Akela the Gray Wolf*, the narratives described in Kipling's text parallels my own narratives and experiences. In this image, the scene of a dimly lit, perhaps wintertime forest is alive with the images of floating and ethereal visions of the alligator gar. At the bottom of the image, Akela sits on his proverbial 'council rock', which was the meeting place for the Seonee wolf pack in *The Jungle Books*. The wolf in this image stands guard over the forest and the fish as they melt together, disrupting the sense of environment and ground. The fish are rendered so that they transcend physical boundaries and become signifiers for a mythic and ghostly animal from another time and place. The wolf, however, sits in a much more grounded position, perhaps simultaneously allowing viewers the experience, but not allowing any danger to befall it.

I remember trying to make sense of my own experiences the same way that Mowgli did as he grew up in the forest alongside the animals. Since then, I often use characters and narratives from those stories as a filter for the subject matter. In addition to books, I also employ Cherokee beliefs and myths, as told by my grandmother of close Cherokee descent. I remember very well being told such a myth when I was young, and it said that if I chose to become a hunter, that when I died, there would be a ladder that ascended over the underworld and up to heaven, and everyone could try to walk up it, though it wasn't without obstacle. If one had hunted animals, used them and gave thanks, then that animal's spirit would be free and without a want for vengeance. However, those who killed animals, squandered the resources, relished in the blood, and never gave thanks would have to carry those animal's bodies up the ladder. If there were too many bodies and the load became too heavy, then that person would fall off the ladder into the

underworld. Though my family never practiced Cherokee religion and beliefs in the household, they told me that story with a complete sense of truth. This image makes an appearance in several of the works, such as *Heavy Heart of the Hunter*, and *on being evaded* (figure 9). In *Heavy Heart of the hunter*, the ladder is rendered so that it is either disintegrating or materializing as the moment of decision, to kill or not, befalls the viewer. The image explores what may befall a hunter in the afterlife. Conversely, in *on being evaded*, the trees, ladder, and deer all share a similar color scheme and style of mark making. This method of rendering illustrates the extreme ease at which a deer can evade the hunter and seemingly evaporate into the forest.

## CONCLUSION

My work collaborates and communicates with an ancient age, and the primal responses of fear and wonder that speak to some of the ancient parts of our minds. My personal experiences lead me to think of nature and wildlife as something that activates a part of us that nothing else comes remotely close to. I view animals as mythic beings extremely in tune with their environment with supernatural abilities to disappear and reappear. Consequently, I create a system of personal mythology that helps me to make sense of these powers that I have so many times witnessed right in front of me.

My studio practice finds ways to visualize the need I have to reckon with different life forms and their powers. It suggests an importance to make a more solid connection to ancestry, positing that recording these acts and experiences is something that has always been important to us, peaks our curiosity and imaginations, and has gone relatively unchanged for thousands of

years. It is also something that has permeated cultures all over the world, both past and present. There is also an inherent need to want to make the invisible and ethereal physically present and visible. My work does that, giving tangible form to the fleeting and elusive nature of my relationship to nature. My own time immersed in nature has assured me that this type of relationship to nature can be just as potent today as it was in the ancient world.

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## FIGURES



Figure 1- *Akela the Grey Wolf*



Figure 2- *Haunted Displacement*





Figure 3- *Follow/Protect*



Figure 4- *I Remember*

*You*



Figure 5- *Heavy Heart of the Hunter*



Figure 6- *Epic of the Hunters*





Figure 7- *Bottomless*



Figure 8- *Where the Caribou Come From*



Figure 9- *On Being Evaded*